Revised Finding of No Significant Impact
for the
Natural Resource Management Activities
at the Savannah River Site

Agency: U. S. Department of Energy

Action: Revised Finding of No Significant Impact

Summary: The Department of Energy (DOE) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) (DOE/EA-0826) in 1993 to analyze the potential environmental impacts of continued management of SRS natural resources at the Savannah River Site (SRS) located near Aiken, South Carolina. Based on the analyses in the EA, DOE determined the proposed action was not a major Federal action significantly affecting the human environment within the meaning of NEPA, and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). One of the key objectives of the SRS Natural Resources Management Plan (NRMP) was the "...continuance of protection and recovery activities for federally listed threatened and endangered animals...". The red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) was one of these endangered species. The U. S. Forest Service Savannah River Natural Resource Management and Research Institute (SRI) at SRS has revised the site's RCW Management Plan. Implementation of the revised RCW Management Plan would have impacts no greater than those described in the 1993 EA. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required, and DOE is issuing a revised FONSI.

Public Availability: Copies of the existing EA and FONSI, or further information on the DOE NEPA process are available from:

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Background: Since the acquisition of SRS by the Federal Government in the 1950s, natural resources management activities have expanded from the original goal of reforesting abandoned farmland to include wildlife management, wildfire suppression, boundary maintenance, soil stabilization, timber management, secondary road maintenance, and ecological research. Since the late 1980s, natural resources management activities have been carried out under a coordinated SRS natural resources management strategy.

The RCW is a Federally-endangered species endemic to the mature longleaf pine/wire grass ecosystem of the southeastern United States. Between 1977 and 1984, the number of RCW groups (i.e., 1 or more birds per cluster) on SRS declined from 16 to 5. By December 1985, only 4 birds remained onsite. At the time, DOE in cooperation with SRI made a commitment to RCW

recovery on SRS. In 1986, a management and research program was initiated, with a goal of establishing a viable onsite population of RCWs. Through this intensive habitat management program combined with aggressive research efforts, the population of this endangered species onsite has improved dramatically to a current population of 150 birds.

As part of this program, numerous research projects were conducted between 1986 to 1997 to address applied questions regarding RCW conservation strategies and technology. These site-specific results, coupled with new information from throughout the Southeast, presented a unique opportunity to revise the existing SRS RCW Management Plan to be better founded and more flexible.

Purpose and Need for Agency Action: DOE needs to take action to implement a revised RCW Management Plan which has been approved by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. DOE needs to implement the revised plan to reflect the results of several years of research on RCW management, and to allow goals for RCW management to be achieved within the context of the existing SRS Natural Resources Management Plan and the site's missions.

Proposed Action: The proposed action is for DOE and SRI to continue management of SRS natural resources in accordance with the NRMP by integrating timber management with endangered species protection programs, balancing regulatory compliance with natural resource and environmental protection programs, and including mission support and research program elements. This includes a revised RCW Management Plan. The proposed RCW Management Plan emphasizes ecosystem-level RCW management that is DOE-mission compatible and provides for flexibility in future development. In an effort to more closely align facilities planning with RCW and ecosystem management, planning and ecological criteria were considered concurrently to reapportion the management areas. Planning criteria included infrastructure, depth to water table, and proposed DOE facility siting. On the basis of these criteria, the central and northwestern portions of SRS are most suited for facilities development. These areas represent drier sites, in close proximity to existing facilities, and are connected by onsite transportation corridors. Ecological criteria included current forest conditions, potential vegetative conditions, and the use of prescribed fire. On the basis of future forest conditions and the reliance of prescribed fire to produce these conditions, RCW habitat is most suited for the eastern two-thirds of SRS. Given the location of existing facilities, the need for future development, and the spatial restrictions on the use of prescribed fire to maintain forest types, SRS was reapportioned into 3 management areas: an 86,069-acre RCW Habitat Management Area (HMA), a 48,167-acre Supplemental RCW HMA, and a 64,111-acre Other-use Area.

The revised RCW management activities would occur in the RCW HMA and Supplemental RCW HMA. Differences in management activities between these areas are primarily due to forest management options. RCW management within the Supplemental RCW HMA would approximate that found in the RCW HMA with the primary objective in both to reach the population target.

More specifically, the changes in the existing RCW management practices at SRS that would be implemented under the proposed RCW Management Plan would include the following:

- Establish three resource management areas, two of which (i.e., RCW HMA and Supplemental RCW HMA) would be managed for RCWs but under differing standards and guidelines;

- Provide a management framework to ensure increased compatibility with the DOE primary mission and flexibility in future development; and

- Establish minimum timber rotation lengths ranging from 100 to 120 years in the RCW HMA foraging habitat and 50 years in the Supplemental RCW HMA foraging habitat.

Alternatives: In addition to the proposed action, DOE considered the no-action alternative, which is the same as the proposed action in the existing EA and FONSI, in that it would continue present activities.

Environmental Impacts: The EA analyzed the potential consequences of the natural resources management activities at SRS to determine if there were any significant environmental impacts. The analysis assessed potential impacts on water resources, floodplains and wetlands, terrestrial resources, air and noise, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, socioeconomics, and hazardous materials. The revised RCW Management Plan restores an endangered ecosystem rather than simply concentrating on a single species. Instead of the original two management zones, three zones are proposed. Suitable habitat intensively managed for the RCW decreases by approximately 20,000 acres, while the population objective decreases from 400 to 315 groups in primary habitat with 103 groups in supplemental habitat.

Determination: Based on the information and analyses in DOE/EA-0826, and after careful consideration of all comments, DOE has determined that the proposed action of revising the RCW management activities on SRS is bounded by the EA and does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA. Therefore, an EIS is not required and DOE is issuing this revised FONSI.

Signed in Aiken, South Carolina, this 28th day of April, 2000.

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